THEOSOPHY

BEING THE

B.B.C. BROADCAST TALK

— by H. S. L. POLAK —

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THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY IN ENGLAND.

12 GLOUCESTER PLACE, LONDON, W.1.

Freedom of Thought

As The Theosophical Society has spread far and wide over the civilised world, and as members of all religions have become members of it without surrendering the special dogmas, teachings and beliefs of their respective faiths, it is thought desirable to emphasise the fact that there is no doctrine, no opinion, by whomsoever taught or held, that is in any way binding on any member of the Society, none which any member is not free to accept or reject. Approval of its three objects is the sole condition of membership. No teacher nor writer, from H. P. Blavatsky downwards, has any authority to impose his teachings or opinions on members. Every member has an equal right to attach himself to any teacher or to any school of thought which he may choose, but has no right to force his choice on any other. Neither a candidate for any office, nor any voter, can be rendered ineligible to stand or to vote because of any opinion he may hold, or because of membership in any school of thought to which he may belong. Opinions or beliefs neither bestow privileges nor inflict penalties. The members of the General Council earnestly request every member of the T.S. to maintain, defend and act upon these fundamental principles of the Society, and also fearlessly to exercise his own right of liberty of thought and of expression thereof, within the limits of courtesy and consideration for others.

THEOSOPHY

By H. S. L. POLAK

SOME of you are asking: Is it possible to find a philosophy which makes life not only worth living but a great and joyous adventure? Can we affirm that there is a plan for the progress of humanity and of the world, and that we can, if we will, discover something of this plan, and work with it? I, a Theosophist, believe that we *can* find such a philosophy and such a plan, and that, even in these times of doubt and insecurity, when many are feeling the acute need for a more stable personal background, there is a philosophy, not only of the mind but of the Spirit also, upon which we can depend. Professor MacMurray, in a previous series of talks, showed clearly how hungry the human heart is for some guidance other than scientific, some directive inspiration that will lead man to be great-hearted, self-sacrificing and idealistic.

As a Theosophist I believe that there is a universal religious experience, behind all creeds and sects, as basic as a fundamental scientific law—a veritable white light in which each race and faith can find the colour, the very tint of its special belief. What we claim for the traditional teachings which form the basis of the Theosophical movement is that they provide a statement of universal religion. I want you to understand that Theosophy is not a religion, but it gives us the common foundation which underlies the various complicated religious teachings and experience. These traditional teachings are a common treasure of all faiths and contain the universal experience of humanity in its search for the Divine.

You will find them appearing again and again in the philosophy, science, metaphysics and theology of every period and race, in different terms according to the need and custom of the times, but at root expressing the same fundamental Truth.

" THERE IS NO RELIGION HIGHER THAN TRUTH "

So we Theosophists aim at encouraging the study of comparative religion, philosophy and science, and we are united by our determination to promote brotherhood, to remove religious, racial and other antagonisms, and to draw together understandingly all persons of goodwill whatever their opinions may be. The motto of The Theosophical Society (we are not a church) is " There is no religion higher than Truth," and members are expected to be seekers after Truth. We try to extend to all a complete tolerance in matters of personal belief and practice, but we claim freedom for everybody to follow his own path, his own idea of Truth.

As a student of Theosophy, I want to try to outline its basic ideas something like this : Firstly, that there is one universal Life beyond as well as within all forms. This is the One God of every faith, the One Universal Life of Science, the Eternal, the Everlasting within the changing, the One without a second.

Following on this comes, secondly, the concept of the One Life as manifesting in a three-fold manner. In theology most of the great faiths accept a trinity, one in essence, but threefold in function : the Father, the Will of God, the personification of Creative Power ; the Son, the Word or Wisdom of God as " mightily and sweetly ordering all things " ; and the Holy Spirit, the Creative Fire of God, giving understanding and inspiring action. These are reflected in many ways in the human being, as, for example, in the three aspects of the mind, recognised in classic psychology as emotion or feeling, as cognition or thinking, and as volition or will. These trinities exist, too, in Nature, and science has made us familiar with some of them.

Thirdly, the teaching found in some form in all faiths is that there is a plan or pattern of growth in which all life is

engaged. Now Theosophists (as do some modern astronomers) see this plan as reaching out beyond our own solar system to stellar universes as well. That plan is so vast that our human mind cannot grasp it, but can only think of it effectively in terms of the cross-section with which we are in contact. The lesser kingdoms of Nature, animal, vegetable and mineral, are all part of it. So are other non-human lines of evolution not yet recognised by science. The tradition of all ages has given them many kinds of names, such as nature-spirits, fairies, angels, messengers of the Most High. These all comprise a host of workers whose consciousness varies with their function. They range from the Seven Mighty Spirits before the Throne of God to minute cell-life. They are all manifestations of the One Life, engaged upon some part of its mighty pattern.

What is Man?

Now let us turn to the constitution of man, his origin and purpose, and the laws which govern his development, and see what Theosophy has to say about them.

The fourth basic idea found in the inner teaching of all the great religions is that man partakes of the nature of the One Divine Life and that all men share this common origin, and so are inherently one and inherently divine. So The Theosophical Society affirms a spiritual basis for human brotherhood, and its first object is to form what we speak of as a " nucleus of universal brotherhood without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour." Man in his essential qualities is a divine spirit, eternal, a spark as it were within the flame of Universal Life. But his nature is complex—for the Divine Spirit in him uses many coverings through which to receive many different experiences. This eternal essence in each of us is said to use at least a threefold covering—what St. Paul called the body, soul and spirit ; and we make an even finer analysis of each of these three.

The body is the physical form with which we are familiar, the soul is the psyche, the thinking-feeling self so much discussed in modern psychology ; and the spiritual body is that in which man realises his oneness with the Divine Life and

with all beings. Man shares the physical body and, to some extent, the psyche, with the animals. He is a human being because the Divine Spirit in him expresses more fully than is possible in the animal, the creative power of will.

Eastern religious philosophy describes the long process of human evolution in many symbolic ways. Hinduism especially formulates it very clearly and logically. But it is too elaborate a subject for me to deal with here. Theosophists generally recognise an unfolding of consciousness as well as an evolution of form. We see this even in the earliest stages right through to the human. Here the thinking process has been stabilised and has enabled a further outpouring of the spiritual life to take place, a more complete expression of Divine Life to take form. Man becomes more and more a directive agent of the divine purpose both in himself and in his outward relations.

To learn how to be truly human, however, needs time as well as very many opportunities. Most of the great faiths, and some of the early Christian groups, teach that man is born again and again upon earth. In each earth-life, they say, he receives the intense and stimulating experiences which the physical world provides through his physical body. He knows love and hate, desire and repulsion, success and failure. At what you and I call death he stores up the results of these experiences in his own permanent individual centre.

The interval between earth-lives is not only a period of assimilation, of ripening and absorbing the fruits of the incarnation just completed. It is a time of fresh aspiration as well, of the renewal of spiritual contacts, and of understanding, each according to his capacity, of the laws that operate in other worlds. Man in his rebirths is like a herbaceous plant which dies down each year, storing the power of stronger growth in its roots. But the root of the human being is his spirit, not his body.

Cause and Effect in Human Relationships

Another great teaching which all religions have is that there is a law of cause and effect in human relationships as well as in

physical science. In Christianity this appears in the text: "Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap." This law is sometimes referred to as Karma. The word means action as well as cause and effect, and the law of Karma recognises that in man's relationships to his surroundings, action and reaction are everywhere equal and opposite, just as they are in physical nature.

If I hit a ball against the wall it springs back quickly or slowly according to whether I hit it hard or not, and straight or slanting according to the direction of my stroke. So in our relationships to one another, life returns to us the equivalent of our effort, but our effort must be skilful as well as intense to produce any desired result. The law of Karma states, for instance, that kindness creates goodwill in return, and criticism hostility, that suspicion isolates a human from his fellows and that an honourable man is trusted by them. If you realise the value of each relationship in terms of law, you can build up a reliable ethical code. Unfortunately it is all too easy to misunderstand and cheapen this law. It is complicated, for it involves a threefold strand of thought, feeling and action. For men and women often act as they do not feel and think as they would not act. So in the outer world, what looks like love does not necessarily breed devotion, and motives, even if they are hidden, are stronger than the spoken word or overt action. It is this law of action and reaction in human life which guides human destiny, and which brings us back again and again to earth-life to meet the unresolved problems of the past. Here we revive and adjust old loves and hatreds. We meet with deserved privation and success. We slowly learn the real meaning of pleasure and pain, and as slowly learn to control them. And so we can build goodwill and freedom and power into our lives instead of recurrent suffering, limitation, and a sense of failure.

A Cycle of Ordered Development

Different races and nations provide varied opportunities and cultural experiences, and these experiences make the individual who lives in them one after another more and more

capable of responding. You can find that the power of Assyria and Egypt, the beauty of Greece, the order of Rome, the freedom of the Renaissance, the scientific mentality of to-day, all represent a cycle of ordered development of human faculty. Certain typical experiences are repeated, at different levels, like a theme in music played in different ways.

But why? The highest achievement of the evolutionary process is not just to become human. To be human is, in itself, a great adventure, but is only one stage of a still greater adventure. In every faith and in every country there appear from time to time outstanding human beings who tower above their fellow men. These are what we call the Elder Brethren. They have passed through the whole gamut of human experience, and know more about it than do we, their juniors. Their vision is clearer, their hearts more compassionate, their knowledge of the Divine Law more profound, and their will more impersonal and tested. We know them by many names, such as Saints, Seers, Teachers, Masters and Saviours. Now our tradition says that these great leaders in their human perfection are indeed supermen, for they have developed the divine powers now latent in all of us, but awake and active in themselves. Sometimes you call these powers miraculous, but to-day we realise that they have been developed through a deeper knowledge of the laws of nature, physical, psychological and spiritual, than the average man has got.

Skilled psychologists to-day perform miracles of healing. Secret Service Bureaus quite often use telepathy and clairvoyance, and some doctors use them to diagnose diseases. These powers in an elementary form are fairly common. Yet the world still regards them as abnormal or dangerous. But Theosophy recognises that their trained and experienced use will be one of the future achievements of humanity.

Attributes of the Perfect Man

We can hardly imagine what is meant by the Perfect Man, but we can describe some of his qualities. These are: a disciplined mind, alert, responsive, and of so wide a capacity and lucid a quality, that he can see with his inner sight the plan of

world-evolution; a gentle and expanded emotional nature, free and joyous, cultured, self-directed, radiating happiness to others; a clear insight into human needs, with power to meet and satisfy them so far as the law of justice allows; at the spiritual level, a compassion so complete that it can permit suffering when suffering is needed to bring illumination; and a will, quiet in operation, but set with immovable determination towards the achievement of the Great Plan.

The Theosophical Society bears witness to the world that such great Elders of the race not only existed in the past but dwell among us to-day, living often in remote places. Their work would be hampered rather than helped by living in our outer turmoil. But we have the evidence of reliable witnesses that they do exist. They watch over mankind, and help man to overcome fear by courage and hatred by love. They inspire those agencies and individuals who are working for the realisation of human brotherhood. Can we then help on more rapidly the processes of human evolution?

The last teaching common to all faiths to which I shall refer here is that of the Path, which Jesus called "the Way." It is the discipline by which the ordinary man can become extraordinary, can become the superman. Although the race as a whole gradually evolves along this Path "according to Plan," with achievements and set-backs, individuals can, if they will, step out of the crowd and hasten their own evolutionary growth. All faiths describe this Path in much the same way, and you and I can enter it at any period of our lives.

The Science of The Spirit

The first thing we need for it is control of mind—that is, to set our thoughts in order by constantly practising certain essential virtues, such as tolerance and equanimity, and a serene detachment from desire; but the basic requirement is love, love for all beings, love so great, so inclusive, that its keenest joy is to serve. A man or woman who determines to set out upon this Path or Way is instantly perceived by the Elder Brethren and will be trained by them through the experiences of daily life. This training is often hard and

exacting, but its fruits are serenity, active happiness and ever-increasing power to be of service to others. The Theosophical Movement in the world to-day reaffirms the existence of the Path, and if you read its literature you will find the outline of the training for those who wish to work with the Elder Brethren in establishing the Divine Wisdom.

I believe that Theosophy does offer a philosophy which makes life understandable, and does show that the laws which govern its evolution are inviolable. It puts death in its proper place as a mere recurring incident in life, opening the gateway to a fuller and more radiant existence. It restores to the world the Science of the Spirit, teaching man to know the Spirit as himself, and the mind and body as his servants. It throws light on the scriptures and doctrines of religions by unveiling their hidden meaning. So it justifies them at the bar of intelligence as, in their original purity, they are always justified in the eyes of intuition.

Questions and Answers also Broadcast

The following are the questions asked by an "Anonymous Layman" and the answers given by Mr. Polak:

Question 1. I'm afraid my mind is still rather muddled about Theosophy, even after hearing your talk; and I should be grateful if you could state your belief rather more precisely. To begin with, what exactly do you mean by "religious experience"? Professor Huxley last week described religion as a particular kind of reaction of man to certain aspects of his environment—perhaps you heard his talk on Rationalism—well, would you agree with him about religion?

Answer 1. I am sorry you think I haven't been precise enough in my talk about Theosophy.

I cannot accept Professor Huxley's description of religion because it is too limited. It confines our reactions to the physical world, and seems to have no room for any other than a material environment.

We believe, on the contrary, that our deepest and most fruitful religious experiences are to be found in our own *spiritual* nature and environment.

We are told: "The Kingdom of God is *within* you" (Luke xvii. 21). If that be true then Professor Huxley's theory cannot, of course, be correct.

Our physical environment will change and we shall see the Kingdom of God established on earth only in so far as we shall actually have experienced it first within ourselves. It means a change of heart or conversion. We shall not, for example, see disarmament until we have first disarmed in our hearts.

Question 2. How, as a Theosophist, do you distinguish between the goodness and badness of various religious experiences?

Answer 2. The question is not quite clear. Is not all religious experience, like any other, a matter of degree and of growth? We get from it what we bring to it, or are capable of receiving from it.

If we are ignorant we learn the wrong lessons from it, and we injure ourselves and our fellow men. As we grow wiser we learn *how* to use our experience so as to enrich our lives and those of our fellow men. That seems to me to be the true difference between what we might call good and bad religious experience.

Question 3. You say that "there is no religion higher than truth" and that all Theosophists must "extend to all a complete tolerance in matters of personal belief and practice." And yet I suppose the Theosophist himself accepts the authority of the Elder Brethren about the distinction between truth and error, doesn't he? And he thinks everyone ought to do so, too—or have I completely misunderstood you?

Answer 3. I rather think you have. The Elder Brethren do not expect us to accept anything upon any authority, not even Their own. They leave it to us to test things for ourselves and to make a choice.

If, as we believe, our inner nature is divine, then the power to perceive truth and error is within *ourselves*. The more we understand this inner nature of ours the more we are able to judge correctly what *is* truth and what *is* error.

Question 4. How are Elder Brethren to be recognised and distinguished from those who claim to be Elder Brethren but in fact are not? Is this also left to the Elder Brethren to decide? And do Elder Brethren ever lapse from Their high calling and become impostors?

Answer 4. We see that the Elder Brethren serve mankind and that those who claim to be Elder Brethren, but in fact are not, demand that mankind shall serve *them*.

"Ye shall know them by their fruits. . . . Every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit." (Matt. vii. 16-18.)

Your question whether Elder Brethren can ever lapse from their high calling and become impostors is evidently based upon a complete misunderstanding of Their true nature. Going from height to height of human experience, They have come at last to the stature of the "perfect man." That which is perfect cannot again become imperfect.

Question 5. Just one other thing on this point. Do the Elder Brethren always agree with one another?

Answer 5. In substance, yes; but the emphasis of their message may well vary according to the occasion or the person who receives the message.

Question 6. I don't think I understand what you mean by Karma. You say that the law "recognises that in man's relationship to his environment action and reaction are everywhere equal and opposite just as they are in physical nature." I suppose that means that the Theosophist cannot believe in anything like the Christian doctrines of redemption or forgiveness of sins. How is the law compatible with what you say is distinctive about man, namely, that he has freedom of choice? And does it mean that once evil has come into the world, nothing effective can be done to resist or conquer it?

Answer 6. I do not agree with you on your first point. Most Western Theosophists *are* Christians. Evidently, therefore, *they* do not believe that the law of Karma is incompatible with the Christian teaching of redemption or forgiveness of sins. They claim, on the contrary, to interpret those doctrines so as to make them more intelligible and more consistent with the idea of divine justice. Though forgiveness and remission of sins are Christian doctrines we must remember that Jesus called upon sinners first to repent. Repentance is the first step to right action, which in due time will overcome the evil done. St. Paul lays down another Christian doctrine—that we must reap what we sow. Thus man is the master of his own destiny. Theosophy seeks to make clear and to reconcile these various teachings.

As to freedom of choice, in my talk I gave the illustration of the ball played against the wall. The player knows what result he wants and tries to get it. He has a choice of strokes. Experience teaches him how to use the right one. Once the ball is played he must await results. If the result is not satisfactory he knows he has chosen wrongly, and must try again. In the end he will learn the right stroke and play it.

Does evil *come* into the world? And what *is* evil? I suppose that for practical purposes we *must* use contrasting terms like good and evil, but from *our* point of view evil is the product of ignorance of divine law. This has its inevitable consequences, but sooner or later we overcome these by our knowledge of the law, and we learn to work *with* it instead of *against* it.

Question 7. Several things you say—for instance about spirits, and rebirth, and the " still greater adventure " which lies beyond human life—remind me of Mr. Oaten's talk a fortnight ago. Could you indicate what is the relationship of Theosophy to Spiritualism?

Answer 7. We have a very great appreciation of the services that Spiritualists are rendering to the community by the evidence that they present of human continuity and individual consciousness after what we call death.

Theosophists assume the truth of survival and continuity and declare they have a philosophy (which I have briefly described) that more fully explains human existence before birth, during physical life, and after death, and man's nature, function and purpose.

Question 8. I think it would bring us down to brass tacks if you could suggest to me what I ought to do, here and now, if I say that I do honestly want to " help on the processes of human evolution and be of greater service to my fellow men." Should I chuck my present job and go and sit at the feet of an Elder Brother? Would you tell me to pray or read the Bible, or what?

Answer 8. If a man earnestly wishes to help on the processes of evolution and to serve his fellow men, he can best do this if he looks upon himself as a spiritual being. This must result in a change of attitude to life, and a rebuilding of character. Then whatever he does, whether it be praying, reading the Bible, or attending to everyday affairs, takes on an entirely new meaning. Such a man dedicates himself daily anew to the ideal of service.

The Elder Brethren don't expect us to sit idly at their feet. I imagine that what They want most of all from us is that we should do our job the best we know at any given moment and do it with all our heart and mind, in a spirit of service. Why then should we chuck our job, unless by so doing we are sure that another job would give us better opportunities of service? Doesn't all this depend upon ourselves? There was once a kitchen-maid who scrubbed floors and washed dishes to the glory of the Lord. That was how she sought the feet of the Master.

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THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

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OBJECTS :

1. To form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour.

2. To encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy, and science.

3. To investigate unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in man.

All who are interested in the subjects touched upon in this pamphlet, or in the Theosophical view of life's problems, are cordially invited to write for further information to The Theosophical Society.

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